

Message Text

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 01 TEL AV 03089 01 OF 04 081331Z
ACTION NEA-10

INFO OCT-01 EUR-12 IO-13 ISO-00 NEAE-00 SSM-03 CIAE-00
DODE-00 NSAE-00 NSCE-00 SSO-00 USIE-00 INRE-00
PM-05 H-01 INR-10 L-03 PA-01 SP-02 SS-15 ACDA-12
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FM AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV
TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 1725
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AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
AMEMBASSY CAIRO
AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
AMEMBASSY JIDDA
AMEMBASSY KUWAIT
AMEMBASSY LONDON
AMEMBASSY MOSCOW
AMEMBASSY PARIS
AMEMBASSY TEHRAN
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 4 TEL AVIV 3089

E. O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PGOV IS
SUBJ: AN ASSESSMENT OF BEGIN'S GOVERNMENT ON THE EVE OF HIS
WASHINGTON VISIT

1. SUMMARY: BEGIN FACES MORE POLITICAL PROBLEMS AS HE
LEAVES FOR HIS CRUCIAL VISIT TO WASHINGTON THAN AT ANY
TIME SINCE HE ASSUMED POWER LAST JUNE. THE BEGIN GOVERN-
MENT HAS LOST CREDIBILITY AT HOME AND ABROAD BECAUSE OF
ITS RECENT SETTLEMENTS DECISIONS. IT HAS A POOR LEGISLA-
TIVE RECORD ON SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC PROBLEMS AND FACES
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PAGE 02 TEL AV 03089 01 OF 04 081331Z

GROWING DIFFICULTIES REGARDING DOMESTIC POLICIES. PER-
SONAL AND POLICY DIFFERENCES AMONG MINISTERS ARE INCREASING.
THERE IS CONCERN ABOUT THE STATE OF US/ISRAELI RELATIONS
AND THE BEGIN GOVERNMENT IS HELD PARTIALLY RESPONSIBLE BY
THE ISRAELI PUBLIC FOR THE DETERIORATION. DESPITE THESE
DIFFICULTIES THE LIKUD COALITION PROBABLY WILL BE ABLE TO
STAY IN POWER FOR THE FORESEEABLE FUTURE, LARGELY BECAUSE

OF THE BASIC INERTIA IN THE ISRAELI POLITICAL SYSTEM AND THE CONTINUING ABSENCE OF AN EFFECTIVE OPPOSITION. ONE EVENT THAT MIGHT CHANGE THIS PICTURE WOULD BE A CLEAR BREAKDOWN IN THE PEACE NEGOTIATIONS PROCESS, AND THEN ONLY IF PERCEIVED HERE AS BEING DUE TO BEGIN'S INFLEXIBILITY.
END SUMMARY

2. AS PRIME MINISTER BEGIN PREPARES TO DEPART FOR HIS THIRD VISIT TO WASHINGTON SINCE ASSUMING OFFICE, HIS GOVERNMENT IS INCREASINGLY CRITICIZED AND HIS POSITION IS WEAKER DOMESTICALLY THAN ON HIS PREVIOUS VISITS. IN JULY HE HAD JUST ASSUMED OFFICE AND THE ISRAELI PUBLIC WAS WILLING TO GIVE HIM A CHANCE; IN DECEMBER HE WAS RIDING HIGH ON THE AFTERGLOW OF THE SADAT VISIT TO JERUSALEM AND SEEMED TO HAVE THE REINS OF POWER SECURELY IN HIS GRASP. NOW, HOWEVER, THE NEGOTIATIONS WITH EGYPT ARE ALARMINGLY CLOSE TO BREAKING DOWN AND INTERNAL PROBLEMS ARE GLARINGLY IGNORED. WASHINGTON WILL BE DEALING WITH A PRIME MINISTER WHOSE DOMESTIC POSITION IS WEAKER FOR THE REASONS DISCUSSED BELOW. NONETHELESS, LIKE ANY POLITICIAN WORTH HIS SALT WHO IS UNDER FIRE HE CAN BE EXPECTED TO PROJECT SELF-CONFIDENCE AND STRENGTH.

3. SETTLEMENT DECISIONS. THE LIKUD GOVERNMENT HAS SUFFERED A GENERAL LOSS OF CREDIBILITY RESULTING FROM ITS HANDLING OF THE SETTLEMENTS ISSUE. THE GENERAL VIEW OF THE
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PAGE 03 TEL AV 03089 01 OF 04 081331Z

ISRAELI PUBLIC REGARDING SETTLEMENT ACTIVITIES IN THE RAFAH AREA OSSTHE SINAI IS THAT THE GOVERNMENT SHOWED INEPTITUDE BOTH IN ITS DECISION-MAKING AND IN ITS IMPLEMENTATION OF THE DECISIONS; THE IMPRESSION HAS BEEN ONE OF ALMOST TOTAL CONFUSION AND LACK OF COHERENCE AND COORDINATION. THE NEGATIVE IMPACT ABROAD OF SUCH A CLUB-FOOTED PERFORMANCE IS ALSO OF CONCERN TO MANY ISRAELIS. THOSE WHO ARE IN DISAGREEMENT WITH THE GOVERNMENT BELIEVE THE BEGIN CABINET EITHER MADE A SERIOUS MISJUDGEMENT REGARDING EGYPTIAN AND US REACTION TO SETTLEMENT ACTIVITIES IN THIS SENSITIVE AREA, OR, MORE SERIOUSLY, THERE WAS COMPLETE DISREGARD FOR EGYPTIAN AND US VIEWS.

4. WITHIN ISRAEL THE DAMAGE TO THE GOVERNMENT'S CREDIBILITY HAS BEEN EVEN GREATER WITH REGARD TO THE SETTLEMENT AT SHILO. THE GOVERNMENT CLEARLY AND CLUMSILY HAS TRIED TO MISLEAD THE PUBLIC. IT CONTINUES TO DO SO, AND THE PUBLIC KNOWS IT. A NUMBER OF ISRAELIS HAVE COMMENTED TO US THAT THEY VIEW THE GOVERNMENT'S ATTEMPT TO COVER UP THE SETTLEMENT ACTIVITIES AT SHILO AS A CHILDISH PRETENSE. THE DAMAGE HERE HAS BEEN SEVERE FOR IT CUTS STRAIGHT TO THE BONE OF THE GOVERNMENT'S IMAGE OF INTEG-

RITY AND FORTHRIGHTNESS.

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PAGE 01 TEL AV 03089 02 OF 04 081427Z
ACTION NEA-10

INFO OCT-01 EUR-12 IO-13 ISO-00 NEAE-00 SSM-03 CIAE-00
DODE-00 PM-05 H-01 INR-10 L-03 NSAE-00 PA-01
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 2 OF 4 TEL AVIV 3089

5. WHAT HARM HAS BEEN DONE TO THE GOVERNMENT BY THESE
ACTIONS? THE IMAGE OF A STRONG, RESOLUTE AND COORDINATED
GOVERNMENT HAS BEEN TARNISHED AND THIS IS PARTICULARLY
DAMAGING AT THIS TIME. THE ATTAINMENT OF PEACE (WITH
SECURITY) REMAINS ISRAEL'S GOAL, BUT A GOOD MANY ISRAELIS
ARE NOW BEGINNING TO QUESTION THE ABILITY OF THIS GOVERN-
MENT TO ATTAIN THAT PEACE; THEY ARE AWARE THAT PEACE NEGOTIA-
TIONS WILL REQUIRE WELL-CONCEIVED AND WELL-COORDINATED
GOVERNMENT POSITIONS, AS WELL AS A GOVERNMENT WILLING TO
TAKE DOMESTICALLY UNPOPULAR STANDS, IF NECESSARY. THE
RECENT HANDLING OF THE SETTLEMENTS QUESTION DOES NOT AUGUR
CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 02 TEL AV 03089 02 OF 04 081427Z

WELL FOR THE SUCCESS OF THE PEACE INITIATIVE.

6. LOCAL POLITICAL DAMAGE FROM SETTLEMENT ACTIVITIES HAS BEEN SOMEWHAT LESS THAN IT MIGHT HAVE BEEN BECAUSE OF THE TOTAL INABILITY OF THE LABOR PARTY EFFECTIVELY TO ATTACK THE GOVERNMENT ON THIS ISSUE. LABOR CONTINUES TO TREAT THE SUBJECT GINGERLY BECAUSE OF THE PRO-SETTLEMENT FORCES WITHIN ITS OWN RANKS. THE ISSUE WAS NOT A MAJOR THEME IN THE PARTY'S RECENT CRITICISMS OF THE GOVERNMENT (SEE TEL AVIV 2438).

7. THE REALIZATION BY THE GOVERNMENT OF ITS LOSS OF CREDIBILITY ON THIS SUBJECT WAS THE COMPELLING FACTOR WHICH LED TO THE DISCUSSION OF SETTLEMENT POLICIES IN TWO RECENT CABINET MEETINGS. HOWEVER, THE INDECISIVE OUTCOME OF THOSE DEBATES DID LITTLE OR NOTHING TO OVERCOME THIS DAMAGE. IF ANYTHING, THE GOVERNMENT'S CREDIBILITY MAY HAVE BEEN ICAIRED FURTHER AS A RESULT OF THE CABINET'S OBVIOUS INABILITY TO ADOPT A CLEAR PUBLIC STAND ON WHAT HAS BECOME A CENTRAL ISSUE. EDITORIALISTS AND COMMENTTORS HAVE QUESTIONED WHETHER THE GOVERNMENT IN FACT KNOWS WHAT IT WANTS. THEY HAVE COMPARED THE SHILO DECISION TO THE METHODS OF THE PREVIOUS GOVERNMENT REGARDING THE SETTLEMENT AT QADDOUM AND HAVE SAID THEY HAD NOT BELIEVED THIS GOVERNMENT WOULD ADOPT SUCH DEVIOUS AND DISSEMBLING MEASURES. THE PUBLIC DISPUTE BETWEEN SHARON AND WEIZMAN LAST WEEK OVER THE SETTLEMENT AT KADESH BARNEA AND THE APPLICABILITY OF THE CABINET'S DECISIONS THERE ALSO HAS DONE NOTHING TO ENHANCE GOVERNMENT CREDIBILITY.

8. POOR DOMESTIC RECORD. THE NEW ECONOMIC POLICY ANNOUNCED IN LATE OCTOBER IS THE ONLY MAJOR SOCIO-ECONOMIC CHANGE
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PAGE 03 TEL AV 03089 02 OF 04 081427Z

AS YET PUT FORWARD BY THIS GOVERNMENT AND ITS DETAILS ARE STILL FAR FROM CLAR. THE HANDLING OF THE BUDGET IN THE CABINET AND THE KNESSET HAS BEEN A COMEDY OF ERRORS AND DISINGENIOUSNESS. INITIALLY THE NEP STRUCK A SYMPATHETIC CHORD WITH A PUBLIC TIRED OF BUREAUCRATIC CONTROLS, BUT HOW TALK HAS TURNED MORE TO THE MAL-DISTRIBUTION OF THE ECONOMIC BURDENS RESULTING FROM THE POLICY. EVEN SOME PRIVATE BUSINESSMEN ARE DISILLUSIONED. THE AVERAGE ISRAELI CITIZEN SEES LITTLE CHANGE UNDER LIKUD AND SOME COMPLAIN THAT THEY ARE EVEN WORSE OFF THAN PREVIOUSLY. THE LIKUD, WHICH BENEFITTED IN LAST MAY'S ELECTION TO A GREAT EXTENT BECAUSE OF THE PUBLIC'S DIS-

SATISFACTION WITH THE ALIGNMENT PERFORMANCE ON ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL PROBLEMS, HAS FAILED TO DELIVER ON ITS CAMPAIGN PROMISES IN THAT AREA. THIS MAY BE ONE OF ITS MORE SERIOUS POLITICAL SHORTCOMINGS IN THE MEDIUM TERM. THE ORIENTAL JEWS, A SEGMENT OF THE POPULATION FROM WHOM BEGIN DRAWS MUCH OF HIS SUPPORT, HAVE IN PARTICULAR BEGUN TO COMPLAIN ABOUT THE LACK OF ECONOMIC IMPROVEMENT. BEGIN HAS NO TROUBLE WITH THEM ON FOREIGN POLICY GROUNDS, WHERE HE IS CRITICIZED BY INTELLECTUALS AND, INCREASINGLY, THE LABOR OPPOSITION.

9. A CONCOMITANT PHENOMENON IS THE DOWNGRADING OF THE ROLE OF THE KNESSET. WITH THE INCLUSION OF THE DMC IN THE CABINET, THERE IS LESS NEED FOR THE GOVERNMENT TO EXERCISE PERSUASION IN THE KNESSET AND IT MAKES LITTLE EFFORT OTHERWISE TO EXPLAIN ITS POLICIES OR TO SEEK SUPPORT OUTSIDE THE COALITION. THE GENERAL RESULT HAS BEEN A LESSENING OF THE IMPORTANCE OF THE CHAMBER AND MANY MKS -- BOTH COALITION AND OPPOSITION -- HAVE EXPRESSED THEIR FRUSTRATION OVER THE LACK OF A MEANINGFUL ROLE. THIS TREND CONTRASTS WITH BEGIN'S EARLY COMMITMENTS TO STRENGTHENING THE DIGNITY OF THE LEGISLATIVE BODY.

10. IN A SIMILAR FASHION, BEGIN'S METHOD OF OPERATION TENDED SOMEWHAT TO DOWNGRADE THE IMPORTANCE OF THE CABINET
CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 04 TEL AV 03089 02 OF 04 081427Z

INITIALLY. FOREIGN POLICY DECISIONS WERE REACHED EITHER BY BEGIN ALONE OR BY THE TRIUMVIRATE OF BEGIN, DAYAN AND WEIZMAN; DOMESTIC DECISIONS -- TO THE EXTENT THEY WERE MADE -- WERE MORE OFTEN LEFT TO EHRlich AND, TO A CERTAIN EXTENT,

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PAGE 01 TEL AV 03089 03 OF 04 081427Z
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AMEMBASSY PARIS
AMEMBASSY TEHRAN
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 3 OF 4 TEL AVIV 3089

YADIN. BEGIN THUS DID NOT USE HIS CABINET AS A COLLEGIAL
DECISION-MAKING BODY. THAT HAS NOW BEGUN TO CHANGE AS HE
HAS ENCOUNTERED FOREIGN POLICY DIFFICULTIES AND HE HAS
MADE GREATER USE OF THE CABINET TO DISCUSS SUCH ISSUES AS
SETTLEMENTS POLICY, THE APPLICABILITY OF 242, ETC. WE
KNOW THAT SOME OF THE MOST RECENT CABINET SESSIONS HAVE
BEEN RANCOROUS AND DIVISIVE. BEGIN DOES NOT USE HIS PARTY
AS A DECISION-MAKING FORUM; THERE IS NO CONSULTATION WITH
PARTY LEADERS NOR ANY KIND OF "KITCHEN CABINET," AS WAS
THE CASE WITH PREVIOUS PRIME MINISTERS.

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PAGE 02 TEL AV 03089 03 OF 04 081427Z

11. CRACKS IN THE CABINET. AT THE SAME TIME, AND CONNECTED
TO SOME OF THE FACTORS MENTIONED ABOVE, CONFLICTS WITHIN
THE CABINET HAVE BECOME MORE APPARENT. BEGIN HIMSELF
ALLUDED OBLIQUELY TO THESE DIFFERENCES WHEN HE REFERRED
ON FEBRUARY 20 TO THE CABINET DISCUSSION OF SETTLEMENTS
HAVING TAKEN PLACE "IN A DEMOCRATIC BODY." CERTAINLY,
THE CABINET IS NOT AS COHESIVE AS IT APPEARED LAST SUMMER.
THE MINISTERS HAVE FOUND THAT IT WAS EASIER TO UNITE WITH
COLLEAGUES IN OPPOSITION THAN TO ARGUE WITH THOSE COLLEAGUES
FOR THE INTERESTS OF ONE'S PARTICULAR MINISTRY. ISRAELIS
HAVE ALWAYS BEEN MORE SURE OF WHAT THEY ARE AGAINST THEN
WHAT THEY ARE FOR. THE DMC HAS CONTRIBUTED TO THIS LOSS
OF CABINET COHESION BECAUSE OF ITS CLEAR IDEOLOGICAL
DIFFERENCES ON SOME IMPORTANT ISSUES, PARTICULARLY ON
SETTLEMENTS.

12. THE EARLIER APPEARANCE OF CABINET COHESION PROBABLY
STEMMED, TO A CERTAIN EXTENT, FROM BEGIN'S EFFORTS TO

MAINTAIN THE IMAGE OF A CABINET WHICH HAD NO LEAKS AND WAS SPEAKING WITH ONE VOICE. HIS PERSONAL IMAGE AS A FORCEFUL LEADER ALSO CONTRIBUTED TO THIS APPEARANCE OF COHESIVENESS. IN FACT, HOWEVER, HIS PERSONALITY AND METHOD OF LEADERSHIP MAY HAVE CONTRIBUTED TO THE POOR WORKING RELATIONSHIPS WE PRESENTLY SEE. ONE RESPECTED OBSERVER SAYS THAT BEGIN'S WORKING ALONE AND CONSULTING WITH HIS MINISTERS ONLY WHEN HE FEELS LIKE IT DEPRESSES AND HUMILIATES SENIOR MINISTERS. WE HAVE OBSERVED WEIZMAN AND DAYAN CHAFING UNDER BEGIN'S LEADERSHIP. WE KNOW THAT WEIZMAN RECENTLY HAS BEEN QUIETLY MEETING WITH VARIOUS NON-LIKUD LEADERS, INCLUDING FORMER PRIME MINISTER RABIN. EHRLICH HAS COMMENTED TO VISITING AMERICAN JEWISH LEADERS THAT HE IS DISCONTENTED WITH RELATIONSHIPS WITHIN THE CABINET. BEGIN SEEMS TO HAVE MADE A DELIBERATE

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 03 TEL AV 03089 03 OF 04 081427Z

EFFORT TO EMBARRASS HIS RENEGADE FORMER HERUT LIEUTENANT, JUSTICE MINISTER TAMIR, BY USING ATTORNEY-GENERAL BARAK AS THE GOVERNMENT'S PRIMARY LEGAL ADVISER AND LEAVING TAMIR, ONE OF THE COUNTRY'S BEST LEGAL MINDS, RESPONSIBLE SOLELY FOR THE ADMINISTRATION OF HIS MINISTRY.

13. THE INTERNAL DISSENT IN THE CABINET AND AMONG THE PUBLIC IS MORE WITH BEGIN'S METHOD OF NEGOTIATING THAN WITH THE SUBSTANCE OF POSITIONS. HARIF OF MAARIV ON FEBRUARY 24 DISCUSSED THIS CABINET DISHARMONY, WHICH HE DESCRIBES AS REAL, BUT CONCLUDED THAT ON THE SUBJECT OF PEACE, "PRESIDENT CARTER WILL FIND IN THIS RESPECT THAT THE BEGIN GOVERNMENT IS UNITED, THE PERSONAL STRUGGLES WHICH HAVE DISTORTED THE IMAGE NOTWITHSTANDING." SOME BELIEVE BEGIN SENSES HIS WASHINGTON VISIT WILL BE LESS THAN WHOLLY SUCCESSFUL AND HE IS HAPPY TO HAVE DAYAN AND WEIZMAN ALONG TO SHARE THE POLITICAL FALLOUT. CERTAINLY NEITHER WEIZMAN NOR DAYAN IS ANXIOUS TO BE PRESENT, BUT THEY ARE LOYALLY RESIGNED NOW TO CARRYING BEGIN'S SPEARS INTO THE CABINET ROOM.

14. US/ISRAELI RELATIONS. EVENTS OF RECENT WEEKS IN THE GENERAL AREA OF US/ISRAELI RELATIONS PUBLIC UNHAPPINESS IN THE US OVER SETTLEMENTS, AIRCRAFT SALES TO ARABS AND ESPECIALLY THE "PACKAGING ASPECT" OF THOSE SALES, US PUBLIC OPINION POLLS SHOWING LOSS OF SUPPORT FOR ISRAEL AND FOR BEGIN SPECIFICALLY, HAVE CAUSED GROWING CONCERN HERE. THE MAINTENANCE OF GOOD RELATIONS WITH THE US IS ONE OF THE FOREMOST TASKS FOR ANY ISRAELI GOVERNMENT. BEGIN MADE MUCH OF HIS EARLIER SUCCESS IN THIS AREA DNT THERE WAS GREAT RELIEF AMONG THE PUBLIC THAT HE HAD DONE BETTER THAN ANTICIPATED. NOW QUESTIONS ARE HEARD WHETHER THAT PREVIOUS SUCCESS WAS MORE APPARENT THAN REAL OR, IF THE ACHIEVEMENTS

WERE REAL, WHETHER RECENT SETBACKS HAVE DAMAGED THOSE ACHIEVEMENTS.

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PAGE 04 TEL AV 03089 03 OF 04 081427Z

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PAGE 01 TEL AV 03089 04 OF 04 081440Z

ACTION NEA-10

INFO OCT-01 EUR-12 IO-13 ISO-00 NEAE-00 SSM-03 CIAE-00

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 4 OF 4 TEL AVIV 3089

15. THIS IS AN AREA WHERE THE LABOR PARTY CAN BE EXPECTED TO ATTACK THE GOVERNMENT. EVEN IF IT PROVES RMEJVBLE TO GET ITS ACT TOGETHER AND MOUNT AN EFFECTIVE OPPOS ZION ON OTHER ISSUES, IT WILL SURELY TRY TO UNDERMINE BEGIN'S CLAIM THAT HE IS BEST QUALIFIED TO HANDLE US/ISRAELI RELATIONS. THERE IS A DEVELOPING PUBLIC DEBATE OVER THE LACK OF CONSULTATIONS WITH THE US, AND THERE ARE

CHARGES THAT THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE TWO COUNTRIES
IS AT ITS LOWEST LEVEL SINCE THE STATE WAS FOUNDED. ONE
PARTICULAR ASPECT OF THAT RELATIONSHIP IS THE CURRENT
DISAGREEMENT OVER THE APPLICABILITY
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CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 02 TEL AV 03089 04 OF 04 081440Z

OF 242 TO THE WEST
BANK; COMMENTATORS AND EDITORIALISTS HAVE BEEN ALMOST UNANI-
MOUS IN CRITICIZING BEGIN FOR CLAIMING THE RESOLUTION DOES
NOT APPLY, NOT ONLY FOR REASONS OF SUBSTANCE BUT BECAUSE
OF THE CONFLICT THIS WILL BRING WITH THE AMERICAN ADMINIS-
TRATION.

16. DO THESE EXPRESSIONS OF CONCERN AND DISCONTENT MEAN
THE LIKELIHOOD OF A CHANGE OF GOVERNMENT OR OF SHIFTS
WITHIN THE GOVERNMENT COALITION? WE THINK THAT A MAJOR
CABINET CRISIS IS UNLIKELY IN THE SHORT TERM. THERE IS A
LARGE AMOUNT OF INERTIA IN THE ISRAELI POLITICAL SYSTEM
(UNLIKE THE VOLATILITY OF PUBLIC OPINION WHICH IS SUBJECT
TO RADICAL AND SUDDEN SWINGS). IN ADDITION, THE LACK
UNTIL NOW OF AN EFFECTIVE OPPOSITION, AND THUS OF A CREDIBLE
ALTERNATIVE, ARGUES THAT THE PRESENT GOVERNMENT COALITION
OR SOME VARIANT THEREOF MUST BE EXPECTED TO CONTINUE FOR
AT LEAST SOME MONTHS TO COME. THE RISE OF THE DMC IS
THE ONLY EXAMPLE IN RECENT YEARS OF AN ATTEMPT TO EFFECT
MAJOR CHANGES IN THE POLITICAL SCENE AND ITS PRESENT
STATE COULD HARDLY ENCOURAGE ANYONE TO EMULATE ITS EFFORTS.

17. OUR ASSESSMENT
WOULD CHANGE SHOULD BEGIN DISAPPEAR
SUDDENLY FROM THE SCENE OR SHOULD THERE BE A DRAMATIC
BREAKDOWN IN PEACE NEGOTIATIONS.
HOWEVER, WE ARE NOT
SURE THAT SIGNIFICANT SHIFTS OR PARTY REALIGNMENTS
WOULD OCCUR EVEN IN SUCH CIRCUMSTANCES. IN THE PARTICULAR
CASE OF A BREAKDOWN IN THE PEACE PROCESS, THE CRUCIAL FACTOR
FOR ISRAEL'S POLITICAL SCENE WOULD BE THE CONTEXT IN WHICH
IT OCCURS AND, MORE IMPORTANTLY, HOW THAT CONTEXT IS PER-
CEIVED HERE (SEPTEL). WHATEVER THE FACTS, MOST ISRAELIS
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PAGE 03 TEL AV 03089 04 OF 04 081440Z

WILL PLACE THE BLAME SQUARELY ON EGYPT -- OR ON THE US.

18. THUS, IN SPITE OF HIS WEAKER DOMESTIC POSITION AT THIS
TIME -- AND THE SHARP INCREASE IN EDITORIAL CRITICISM IN
RECENT DAYS ILLUSTRATES THAT WEAKER POSITION -- BEGIN IS

STILL IN CONTROL. POLITICIANS IN THE COALITION AND IN THE OPPOSITION RESPECT HIM (MANY FEAR HIM) AND ALL ARE RELUCTANT TO CHALLENGE HIM AT PRESENT. THE OPPOSITION REMAINS HOBBOLED BY DIVIDED LEADERSHIP, THOUGH PERES IS SLOWLY BEGINNING TO REESTABLISH SOME GREATER POLICY COHESION FOR THE LABOR PARTY, AT LEAST IN THE FOREIGN POLICY-AREA. DIVISIONS WITHIN AND AMONG ALL PARTIES EXIST, AND THERE ARE CONTINUAL RUMBLINGS OF IMPENDING SPLITS OR REALIGNEMENTS. BUT A SENSE OF IMPENDING CONFRONTATION WITH THE US OR OF OPEN US PRESSURE WILL CAUSE ISRAELIS TO CLOSE RANKS AND MANY OF THOSE DIVISIONS WILL TEMPORARILY DISAPPEAR. IN SHORT, BEGIN IS SOMEWHAT WEAKER POLITICALLY THAN HE WAS, BUT HE IS STILL IN THE CATBIRD SEAT. LEWIS

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